

The Romans and Us

Robert Harris

When I started out, setting a novel in the Roman world seemed a bizarre thing to do. But now it turns out that my book was merely a small part of a big trend. The Romans are coming to Britain, and the invasion is on three fronts.

The New Nazis

In the cinema, Hollywood, having given us *Gladiator* in 2000, is about to produce Hannibal. In the bookshops, Tom Holland's excellent new study of the fall of the Republic, *Rubicon*, is one of a series of books re-evaluating Rome for a new generation. On television, the BBC has devoted two of the most expensive documentaries it has ever made (costing together almost £3m) to Roman topics: one on the Colosseum and one on – yes! – Pompeii. Small wonder that the executive producer of the Colosseum film, Laurence Rees, calls the Romans 'the new Nazis'. Audience research for the BBC's History Department shows that they have replaced the Third Reich as the most popular documentary subject.

There are, I think, two broad reasons for this reawakened interest in Rome. The first is that the emergence of America as the world's only superpower has suddenly made the Romans seem much more relevant to us. This wasn't the case twenty years ago, when Cold War rivalry disguised the extent of America's military dominance. But now that Russia has an economy roughly the size of the Netherlands', America truly stands supreme, its defence spending outstripping that of the next fifteen nations put together. Forget the Spanish empire in the seventeenth century, or the British in the nineteenth: nothing like this has been seen since Rome. The most brilliant sequences in *Gladiator* were not the staged fights in the arena, but the battle scenes in the German forest, where the technologically-superior legions annihilated the barbarians, much as the US armoured divisions recently pulverized Saddam Hussein's Republican Guard.

Contemplating this ruthlessness, the military historian, Max Hastings, recently compared the Roman Empire to the Third Reich: 'Its servants ruled their world in a fashion little different from that of the Nazis 2,000 years later, enslaving millions and killing its enemies without mercy.' But Rome never made Hitler's mistake of heading down the historical dead-end of racial purity. It would never have lasted as long if it had.

The comparison, again, is closer to America. Rome was not a single, homogenised state: it was an ideal, to which people from all over its conquered territories could aspire. Ronald Reagan when he was president was fond of saying that if a man went to England he would not become an Englishman, and if he went to France he would not become a Frenchman, but if he went to America he would immediately become an American. Rome had a similar capacity to absorb the ambitious immigrant: twenty-five years' service in the imperial navy, for example, would give a Greek, an Egyptian or a Dalmatian the right to citizenship. Their children, in due course, would have full voting rights. Even freed slaves could rise to become multi-millionaires.

A Military Machine

And Rome's technological dominance, like America's, was not

confined to the military. Early in my researches for *Pompeii*, I came across a privately-printed book on the Roman Pantheon by David Moore, a former American civil engineer. Moore, on a tourist trip to Rome, happened to visit this astonishing building, with its vast concrete dome spanning some 143 feet, and learned that it was erected by hand 1,800 years ago. 'I turned to my wife and instinctively said, "If I gave the task of designing a building like this to our engineers, they could not do it. There is not one steel reinforcing rod in the building."' During the flight home to America, I was constantly disturbed about the strength and durability of this ancient building. After all, I hold three engineering degrees, and with a lifetime of experience in the design and construction fields. Perhaps I had missed something?

Moore has since devoted his retirement to the study of Roman concrete, and has concluded that their techniques were so advanced that the Americans did not come close to matching them until they started building the Hoover Dam in the 1920s. Nobody seems to have given much thought to this before. But arcane though it sounds, it was the Romans' use of concrete – and in particular their development of hydraulic cement in the century before the birth of Christ – which transformed the world and made possible the globalisation of Roman culture. Now every town in the empire could become a mini-Rome, with its forum, its temples, its basilica, and – above all, perhaps – its baths and its aqueduct.

The Power of the Aqueduct

This was the starting-point for my own fascination with Rome. The water drying on stone which I smelt in Pompeii three years ago turned out to be the point at which the great Campanian aqueduct entered the city. Eventually I made it the centre of my novel, and my main character the engineer who ran it. The Aqua Augusta has been largely ignored by the archaeologists of Pompeii and Herculaneum, who, for obvious reasons, have tended to concentrate on the artistic and religious aspect of Roman society. And yet, at sixty miles, it was the longest aqueduct in the world, built by Marcus Agrippa for Augustus in the first century B.C. – a miracle of civil engineering, winding down from the mountains near Sorrento, around the Bay of Naples, to the Roman naval base of Misenum, with a mean drop along its entire length of just two inches every one hundred yards. Given the tools available to the Romans, we literally have no idea how they could have done it.

The development of the aqueducts was a quantum leap in civilisation. It enabled the Romans to build towns such as the fleet headquarters at Misenum, with a population of 20,000, where otherwise no substantial settlements could exist because of the lack of water. Rome had nine aqueducts, and they made it possible for the city to swell from perhaps 150,000 citizens at the time of Julius Caesar to more than a million under the emperors. The achievement, at a time when our British ancestors were still collecting rainwater in earthenware bowls, is staggering. A. Trevor Hodge, classics professor at the University of Ottawa, puts it well: 'How can we withhold our respect from a water system that, in the first century A.D., supplied the city of Rome with substantially more water than was supplied in 1985 to New York City?'

The Romans had sulphur matches, magnifying glasses, magnets, windows, heated swimming pools, showers, flush lava-

tories, central heating, and a communications system so sophisticated that it is possible that the emperor Titus in Rome – 120 miles north of Pompeii – knew by four o'clock on the afternoon of the eruption that something terrible was happening on Mount Vesuvius. The Romans had even worked out the principles of steam power, although they lacked the metallurgical processes to weld pipes together with adequate strength to withstand the pressures involved. Had they developed that technology – had history taken a different turn – it is not too fanciful to imagine that we might have seen Roman paddle-cruisers plying the Mediterranean, or Roman railways cutting across Europe, half a millennium before these things came to pass.

Decline and Fall

And here, I think, is the second great reason why the Romans fascinate us: they had so much, a thousand years before the Battle of Hastings, and they – and mankind – somehow lost it all. The great imperial highways reverted to weeds. The signal towers collapsed. The aqueducts became choked with limescale and eventually ceased to flow. Could it, we wonder, happen to us? It is, perhaps, no accident, that the Victorians were equally obsessed with Rome. The only other novelist I'm aware of who also set a book around Pompeii was Edward Bulwer-Lytton in 1834. Despite one of those terrible opening sentences which were his trademark (“‘Ho, Diomedes, well met! Do you sup with Glaucus tonight?’”) *The Last Days of Pompeii* had nevertheless gone into thirty-two editions by 1914. Bulwer-Lytton was writing for an audience that increasingly came to believe that British imperial power would last forever: that the industrial revolution and the spread of British institutions and the Christian faith across the globe marked ‘the end of history’.

The story of Pompeii served as an antidote to that: something to make the Victorian flesh creep. As the excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum intensified during the 1800s, it became apparent that here was a society as confident and industrious as their own, remarkably sophisticated and just as commercial (SALVE LUCRUM! was found carved all over Pompeii: ‘Hail profit!’) and yet it had been wiped out, apparently in an instant. Pompeii was both a revelation of how advanced Roman civilisation had become, and a warning that nothing lasts forever. What had happened to one town was emblematic of what eventually had overwhelmed an entire empire.

Now, at the start of the twenty-first century, one detects the same uneasy undercurrent. No empire lasts forever. Even when the imperial sun appears to be reaching its zenith, as it did for the Victorians, we know from history that the hidden forces of destruction are invariably at work in the shadows. What could go wrong for America? Might Washington, like Rome, fall victim to imperial over-stretch? Could military force abroad eventually have to be withdrawn because of bankruptcy at home? Might the whole idea of America eventually be challenged and destroyed by some charismatic new faith: some fundamentalist variant on Christianity? After all, as Tacitus wrote nearly 1,900 years ago: ‘The man who is prepared to die will always be your master.’ It is the rationale of the suicide bomber in a sentence.

Or will it, as our long, hot summers have made many start to wonder, be Nature itself that disrupts America's New World Order? Has the very dynamism of the United States economy begun to threaten the climate of the globe?

As an epigraph to *Pompeii*, I could not resist quoting from an essay by Tom Wolfe, written in 2000: ‘American superiority in all matters of science, economics, industry, politics, business, medicine, engineering, social life, social justice, and of course the military was total and indisputable. Even Europeans suffering the pangs of wounded chauvinism looked on with awe at the brilliant example the United States had set for the world as the third millennium began.’

But, of course, a Roman could have written almost exactly the

same about his country at the start of the first millennium – and, in fact, one did: ‘In the whole world, wherever the vault of heaven turns, there is no land so well adorned with all that wins Nature's crown as Italy, the ruler and second mother of the world, with her men and women, her generals and soldiers, her slaves, her pre-eminence in arts and crafts, her wealth of brilliant talent...’ Those were the words of Pliny, the commander-in-chief of the Roman fleet at Misenum, who lost his life during the eruption of Vesuvius.

Walking through the shattered streets of Pompeii as the sun sets is probably the best place on earth to contemplate the transience of empires, Roman or American. Here is all the evidence one needs of the energy that builds them, and the inevitability of their destruction – everywhere around one: hubris and nemesis in a single glance.

Robert Harris's latest novel Pompeii is available in bookstores everywhere. It was selected by the Sunday Times as one of the 'Books of the Year'.